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'El Chapo' jailbreak is both a Mexican and an American story

Luis Gomez Romero

University of Wollongong, lgromero@uow.edu.au

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'El Chapo' jailbreak is both a Mexican and an American story

Abstract

Imagine a mighty drug lord confined in the toughest maximum-security prison. One night he escapes through a hole in the shower. This hole leads to a 1500-metre tunnel that ends in a construction site in a nearby neighbourhood. The tunnel has been equipped by expert mining engineers with lighting and ventilation. Its construction required 3250 tonnes of earth to be removed in sight of the guards in the prison's towers. It seems like the plot of a blockbuster thriller. Unfortunately, it is an account of Joaquín Guzmán Loera's jailbreak from the Altiplano prison near Mexico City. Guzmán – known as “El Chapo” (Shorty) – is head of the Sinaloa Cartel, the most powerful global drug-trafficking syndicate. Forbes magazine rated “El Chapo” the 67th-most-powerful man in the world in 2013. His escape necessarily implies an inside job at some level. The jailbreak hence seemingly confirms American narratives that represent Mexico as a corrupt, sluggish and failing state.

Keywords

both, jailbreak, chapo, el, story, mexican, american

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[Luis Gómez Romero](#)

Author



1. [Luis Gómez Romero](#)

Lecturer in Human Rights, Constitutional Law and Legal Theory at University of Wollongong

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It seems like the plot of a blockbuster thriller. Unfortunately, it is an account of [Joaquín Guzmán Loera’s jailbreak](#) from the Altiplano prison near Mexico City. Guzmán – known as “El Chapo” (Shorty) – is head of the Sinaloa Cartel, the most powerful global drug-trafficking syndicate.

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Embodying the Mexican bogeyman

El Chapo incarnates everything that the United States pities and fears about Mexico: both its poverty and the violence it raises. According to American [mainstream media](#), El Chapo is a Mexican nightmare who, for a second time, has been released to haunt the world with the power of his poisoning drugs and the violence they entail.

El Chapo is depicted in US media as the drug lord who haunts the world.

El Chapo had slipped out of a high-security prison before. In 2001, he escaped in a laundry cart from the Puente Grande prison. He was not recaptured [until February 2014](#).

The US government then sought to have El Chapo extradited. The Mexican government ruled this out as he was liable in his own country for (literally) hundreds of years in jail.

It is highly probable that El Chapo's escape will boost American demands to extradite top crime figures from Mexico. Such demands mirror [Alexis de Tocqueville's](#) assessment of Mexico as an unreliable state. As early as 1835, Tocqueville claimed in *Democracy in America* that the US would elevate as a global power because its southern neighbour was worthless.

Mexico, Tocqueville argued, would remain "the victim of anarchy" or "the slave of military despotism" given its general "uncivilised state" and the "corruption of its customs".

Tocqueville's judgement on Mexico spells out deeply entrenched cultural and political prejudices against the inhabitants of the Spanish-speaking America. In Tocqueville's work, the centre speaks against the periphery.

Enter drugs. These have traditionally been conceived as substances that cause significant organic or mental changes that ultimately *overcome* bodily defences. Drugs thus represent potential sources of disease.



Mexican drug lord 'El Chapo' embodies American perceptions of the threat from the south. EPA/Mario Guzman

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In this sense, El Chapo embodies a sickening threat against an image of beauty and a promise of health based on conformity to a (supposedly) *civilised* norm. The reproduction of El Chapo's hardened facial features in the world's media summarises the anxieties of wealthy countries about conflicted states such as Mexico: a self-imagery of health, cleanliness and order on the one hand facing pollution, filth and violence on the other.

In the First World's imagination, the incarceration of El Chapo and his ilk amounts to a cultural containment of Mexico's assumed depravity.

Mexico sells ... but who is buying?

Last month, business magnate Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the American presidency. He [accused](#) Mexican immigrants of introducing drugs, crime and rape into the US. It is no surprise that Trump [has used](#) El Chapo's escape to confirm the accuracy of his depiction of Mexicans as fiends and rapists who simply abuse the US.

The interconnected histories of anti-drug policies in Mexico and the US, however, reach far beyond Trump's reading of El Chapo's escape. In the 1950s, American artists and intellectuals such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg began travelling [south of the border](#) to acquire Mexican drugs.

Later, following the Vietnam War, drugs symbolised social challenges to established norms across the Western world. For the next decade, hippies and various representatives of the anti-establishment culture followed those pioneers.



American nations are living with the consequences of Richard Nixon's 1971 declaration of a 'war on drugs'. White House

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In this context, Richard Nixon [declared a "war on drugs"](#) in June 1971. Nixon ordered the southern border closed to cut off the traffic of Mexican marijuana into the US. As the border shutdown debilitated the Mexican economy, however, it became clear that Nixon also intended to force Mexico to comply with newly established supply-focused American drug policies.

Mexico has largely followed the US lead in its aggressive anti-drug policies since then. The US, however, has not been entirely honest in its approach to drugs. In 1989, for example, the Kerry Senate committee report [found](#) that CIA-backed guerrilla fighters against the leftist

Nicaraguan Sandinista regime – that is, the infamous *Contras* – were funded by collaborating with drug traffickers.

In more recent times, two US investigations have shown that the [Wachovia bank](#) – now a Wells Fargo subsidiary – and [British-based HSBC](#) facilitated over many years the movement of billions of dollars in El Chapo's profits. Both banks were fined, but no bankers were tried, jailed or even charged.

In the meantime, since President Felipe Calderón launched an unparalleled mobilisation of security forces against drug cartels in 2006, estimates put the death toll in the Mexican drug wars [above 120,000 killed](#) by 2013 – not including 20,000 missing.

The cocaine, marijuana and meth that provide numbness or stimulation to American, European or even Australian bodies is paid for in the dreadful currency of Mexican gross national pain.

Shared failure, shared responsibility

The long-term American undermining of the Mexican state has raised El Chapo and other drug kingpins into their rogue power. It is true that the latest escape points to extravagant corruption in the Mexican government, military and police. El Chapo, however, is also known as “Lord of the Tunnels” for his mastery in creating underground paths not only for escaping law enforcement agencies, but also for [smuggling drugs into the US](#).

Just as it is unlikely that the excavation of the tunnel from the Altiplano prison went unnoticed for an entire year in Mexico, it seems improbable that a tunnel could be dug, for example, between Tijuana and San Diego without anyone noticing it on the American side of the border.

Greed is the same on both sides of the Río Bravo. Organised crime, as Raymond Chandler observed in *The Long Goodbye*, is ultimately “the dirty side of the sharp dollar”.

El Chapo's brutal empire is both a Mexican and an American failure: the challenges it implies for peace and the rule of law in North America can only be overcome if all the parties affected by it accept, in good faith, their shared responsibility for stopping the profitable demand-driven business of pain that accompanies drug trafficking